

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Hanging out with offline friends in an online context:  
How the experience of “partial anonymity” impacts on  
identity management

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of  
Master of Science in Psychology  
At Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

---

Katherine M. Krueger

2005

---

## Abstract

Instant Messaging has increased in popularity since 1999 and is now often used by adolescents to communicate with friends already known in their offline social networks. Instant Messaging can be thought of as a hybrid between chat rooms and email. Chat rooms are conducted in “real time” but are an open network in that anyone can have access to interacting with one another. Email is asynchronous and yet it is also a more personal, “closed network” where communicators must generally exchange addresses before they can communicate. When email is used for social reasons communicators generally know each other offline already. Instant Messaging is both synchronous like chat rooms, and can be used as a closed social network, like email. One of the distinguishing characteristics of MSN Instant Messenger (IM) when used between friends is the experience of knowing the other communicator both offline and online. This situation offers the anonymity traditionally experienced online while acknowledging that communicators bring offline knowledge of each other to their online interaction. Thus, the overall relationship is not conducted under conditions of anonymity like that experienced with chat rooms, MUD’s and newsgroups. Online anonymity, in these forums, has been implicated in negative behaviours such as “flaming” and deception which are largely attributed to deindividuation. This research investigates how offline knowledge, which presumably acknowledges the other communicator as an individual, impacts on the experience of hanging out online. Adolescent girls construct identity through friendships and this research is concerned with identity constructions when friendships are maintained between both online and offline contexts.

The research design was based on an ethnographic approach to the study of the Internet. Eight adolescent girls (aged 13-17) were interviewed both online through IM and in a more traditional face-to-face context. Data analysis was informed by positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) to provide a coherent understanding around how identities are continuously constructed and transformed by contextual criterion.

Analysis revealed that IM fulfils adolescent motivations toward social connection and expressing personal autonomy which are both important in the process of identity formation. Instant Messaging is constructed as a space which allows the girls to balance

these motivations in a way which helps them to maintain a positive self-image. The anonymity experienced online is tempered by offline knowledge of each other. This produces an environment of “partial anonymity”. This study examines the experience of partial anonymity and the distinct advantages arising from the lack of online social cues. Control and protection are integral advantages which allow the girls to balance teenage motivations, thus informing their sense of self in largely positive ways. This becomes evident in how they demonstrate commitment to their friendships and negotiate disclosure, trust and risk.

Findings are discussed in relation to contemporary social identity theories which have been applied to computer-mediated communication. Partial anonymity changes how adolescents use technology to construct and preserve a positive self-image. Adolescents understand the flow between contexts and the resulting negotiations around evolving socialisation standards.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my partner, Campbell Woollams, for the many ways in which he has supported my decision to take time out to write this thesis.

Thank you to my advisor, Kerry Chamberlain, for his thorough reading of each draft, honest critiques and consistently approachable demeanour. It has been a joy to work with you.

Thank you to my lovely group of friends from the Glenfield gym who have endeavoured to keep me in the social loop even when I had to say “maybe next time” so often. I will cash in on all those rainchecks now!

I would also like to thank the eight girls who participated in this study. I have appreciated your openness and honesty toward the interview process. I wish you all the best as you continue discovering what makes you unique in this world.

Thank you, Cathy Whyte (Cat), for introducing me to Instant Messaging and in the process planting the seed which led me to this point. I think are one truly amazing and beautiful person and I value our friendship immensely.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to my Mom. Nothing concrete regarding this thesis comes to mind, but it is not often that I have the opportunity to put in writing just how grateful I am for my Mom. Thank you, Mom, for showing enthusiasm, pride and confidence in my every achievement.

# Table of Contents

Title page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The Early Research	1
Synchronous Real-Time Chat	3
Visual Anonymity	5
Partial Anonymity	7
Identity and Adolescence	9
Adolescent Use of Technology	11
Preparation for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	12
Summary	13
<b>Chapter Two: Methods</b>	<b>15</b>
Participants	15
Methodology and Research Design	15
An ethnographic approach	15
The researcher's history	16
Procedure	16
Semi-structured interviews	16
Literature review strategy	18
Transcription of interviews	19
Method of Analysis	20
MSN Instant Messenger	21
<b>Chapter Three: Performing Commitment</b>	<b>25</b>
Extending Social Networks and the Status of Friends	25
Autonomy and Managing the Flow between Contexts	28
Maturity, Texting and the Future of IM	31
Summary	33

<b>Chapter Four: Privacy and Disclosure</b>	<b>35</b>
Proactive Portrayal of Identity	37
Incongruence	37
Personal Autonomy	40
The Interaction between Privacy and Context	44
Repositioning of Privacy	46
Christy's Story- Boys and the Critical Point of Departure	49
Who am I and how do I fit in?	50
Summary	53
 <b>Chapter Five: Truth and Disclosure</b>	 <b>54</b>
Verbal Disclosure	55
Non-Verbal Disclosure	60
Truth	64
Summary	65
 <b>Chapter Six: Balancing Risk with Trust</b>	 <b>67</b>
Trusting the Context	67
Trusting the Confidant	71
 <b>Chapter Seven: Conclusions</b>	 <b>77</b>
 <b>References</b>	 <b>83</b>
 <b>Appendices</b>	 <b>91</b>
Appendix A: Ethics Proposal	91
Appendix B: Information Sheet	102
Appendix C: Consent Form	104
Appendix D: Consent to be Contacted Form	105
Appendix E: Proposed Interview Topics	106